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# Historical Cultures under Conditions of Deindustrialization Working Group Report

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# INTERNATIONAL LABOR AND WORKING-CLASS HISTORY



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## **Historical Cultures under Conditions of Deindustrialization Working Group Report**

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| Journal:         | <i>International Labor and Working-Class History</i>   |
| Manuscript ID    | ILW-AR-2018-0001.R2  |
| Manuscript Type: | Report from the Field  |
| Region:          | Europe   |
| Time Period:     | 20th Century, Contemporary   |
| Subject/Fields:  | Labour History, Landscape studies, Heritage, Community Development, Cultural Geography   |
| Abstract:        | <p>Historical representations of deindustrialisation construct a discourse whose ideological undertones, far from confining it to the realm of symbolic nostalgia, have profound effects on contemporary societies. In 2015, within the European Labour History Network (ELHN), a working group on historical cultures of labour under conditions of deindustrialisation began to critically study and reflect on this nascent theme (Wicke &amp; Eklund 2016), growing from a small group of researchers to a large collective and network of academics across Europe and beyond. In this 'report from the field' we share our ongoing research findings focusing on three main themes of: human relations, landscape, and the politics of methods based on our last two gatherings in Germany and France.</p> <p>Our main focus is the human and non-human interactions that remain after deindustrialisation, who realise the transformation processes. Many of our discussions dealt with the social aspects of these processes, namely the continuing struggle over the meaning of industrial work and its loss, the unresolved tensions between the top-down and bottom-up initiatives. These ideas include understanding the 'wounds of class' (High 2013), which deindustrialisation entails or the changes to natural</p> |

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|  | <p>environments and the resulting hybrid entanglements. Our research explores these topics in a critical manner opening up discourse between its historic representations and contemporary landscapes and providing insights into processes of re-thinking the industrial past and its future.</p> <p>The second point is the concept of territory itself, moving beyond traditional ideas of landscape, and towards a relational understanding (Wylie 2007). This includes the more-than-representational (Thrift 2007) and performativity concepts disseminated through various narrative forms that show how memory, identity and particularly industrial cultures are perceived and practiced (DeSilvey 2010, Petursdottir 2012). At our workshops, themes from musical explorations of labour organisations as aural labour landscapes to the rethinking of gendered landscapes, opened up new discourse in the way that deindustrialisation is performed and understood.</p> <p>Our final point looks at the politics of methods used in the research of deindustrialising communities or institutions that nurture, propagate and manage these representations. For example, encountering the possibilities of adapting oral history tools in different regions and areas of research, they raised the question as to whose voices are heard in the process of 'heritagisation'. These approaches we acknowledge are not simply objective methods, but are engrained in as much of the research outputs. Particularly, the 'heritagisation' and the 'museumisation' of landscapes/sites by private individuals and institutionalised structures continue to be recurring topics and require unique techniques that are useful and appropriate to their contexts.</p> <p>Further ahead, we plan to develop these more-than-representational themes by collecting selected papers into an edited volume for publication and dissemination for the next ELHN conference in 2019. The future of deindustrialisation will continue to impact not only European concerns but global issues as well. Our ongoing network will generate useful entry points investigating new perspectives, making critical insights among the diverse critical representations of deindustrialisation in different media and contents, and moving these debates into the future.</p> <p>REVISED ELHN Conference Report Abstract_28April.docx</p> |
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Crumbling smokestacks, shuttered furnaces, and abandoned quarries are all striking representations of deindustrialization. These and other images construct a discourse whose ideological undertones, far from confining it to the realm of symbolic nostalgia, have profound effects on contemporary societies. In 2015, within the European Labor History Network (ELHN), a working group on historical cultures of labor under conditions of deindustrialization (working group) began to critically study and reflect on this nascent theme.<sup>1</sup> It grew from a small group of researchers to a network of academics across Europe and beyond. Though the study of deindustrialization is not new, where contemporary work offers insights into the continuing struggle over the meaning of classical industrial work and its loss, revealing unresolved social, cultural and political tensions.<sup>2</sup> Yet, existing representations of deindustrialization have been criticized as ‘smokestack nostalgia’.<sup>3</sup> In order to chart how we understand contemporary industrial decay in our political, cultural and economic climate, the working group explores representations and more-than representations of loss and regeneration in deindustrialized regions primarily in Europe but widening to include, a growing global network.

This network leads to numerous processes of exploring these aspects in a variety of ways. Furthermore, the annual meetings and upcoming publications emphasize the global relevance of our proposed perspectives by involving pan-European and non-European research projects. As such, in this ‘note from the field’, we share our ongoing research findings from our annual meetings and symposia since 2015 working towards notions of post-industrialization focusing on three emerging themes: human interactions, landscape reinterpretations, and the politics of methods.<sup>4</sup> This is concluded with a view towards the future of our working group.

## Human Interactions

Our first point are the human interactions that occur through deindustrialization. These discussions dealt with the social aspects of these processes, namely the continuing struggle over the meaning of industrial work and its loss, and the unresolved tensions between the top-down and bottom-up initiatives. It includes understanding the ‘wounds of class’ which the de-industrial situation entails or the changes to ‘natural’ environments and the resulting entanglements.<sup>5</sup> Our research explores these topics in a representational and more-than representational manners that open up discourses between these historic representations and contemporary landscapes providing insights into processes of re-thinking the industrial past.<sup>6</sup>

For example, by emphasizing or transforming the industrial aspect of the landscape as in Katowice, Upper Silesia the townspeople come to terms with its socialist past, though attempting to reinvent its post-industrial future.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the contemporary utilization of these places points to numerous new research questions, where the tendencies towards environmental issues neglects serious social questions. The evaluation of the industrial past can cause tensions between those that lived it and those that are currently remembering as is the case in Sardinia where the establishment of the Sulcis-Inglesiente Geopark has placed at odds the contemporary environmental and touristic needs with the memories of its mining residents.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, diverse cultural aspects can also be analyzed such as the leisure activities at the time of industrial activities (brass bands in Great Britain), its cultural transformation to diverse museums (in the Ruhr region) or special recreational zones or through their memorization via art (in Scotland). All these aspects point to the fact that these areas are more than just human landscapes, not just because neither the human representatives nor their social unit has been disappeared but also because “their legacy” is mobilized in diverse ways.

## **Landscape and Territorial Interpretations**

The second point is the concept of landscape and territory itself, moving beyond traditional ideas and towards a relational understanding.<sup>9</sup> This includes the more-than-representational concepts disseminated through various narrative forms that show how memory, identity and particularly industrial cultures are perceived and practiced. Themes from musical explorations of labor organizations as aural labored landscapes to the rethinking of gendered landscapes, opened up new discourse in the way that deindustrialization is performed and understood.<sup>10</sup>

This new discourse challenges the result of human and natural interaction in which numerous heritage terms such as historic urban landscape or cultural landscape are discussed by UNESCO. It also points to not just the social creation of the given landscape but the contemporary utilization of it. Such a territory can be seen as the relationship between nature and culture, not just people and ideologies transforming the utilization of a given territory. Such research can be investigated by diverse sources through tangible (artistic and monumental) or intangible (through traditions and interviews). Similarly, at different ages and socio-political circumstances different aspects of this interconnectedness are emphasized and

or evaluated as valuable to preserve. Accordingly, sites can also be seen as different aspect of the evaluation process, which is why other transformation processes such as gendered, audiovisualized, and heritagized aspects of the given territories have been discussed as processes during the annual conferences.

The notion of territory also involves the question of ownership that has led to numerous possible research initiatives regarding actors. On one hand a general notion of heritagization on local, regional, national, European and global (UNESCO) level can be identified but many times it does not involve the notion of bottom-up initiatives or the sustainability of the given project. Diverse actors have to cooperate not just hierarchically, but also, professionally as for instance many times the former industrial territories are either polluted so environmental specialists are needed for the utilization projects or have dubious ownership status for which legal representatives are necessary. These aspects would allude to the fact that the local/national specificities would prevent the option of a comparative or global research initiative numerous presentations of the former conferences would deny this assumption. Ownership varies if the given example spread through a wide scope of territory or focused on a well-defined factory location, similarly different questions can be raised if the case study is located within an urban environment or at its periphery. These questions and aspects can yet lead to new comparative possibilities that are more related to the character of the given territory than its geophysical location.

## Politics of Methods

Our final point looks at the politics of methods used in the research of deindustrializing communities or institutions that nurture, propagate and manage these representations. Law claims that the methods used to gather narratives, data and other forms of research are as integral to the 'making' of research.<sup>11</sup> This creates a particular 'attunement' to methods that put to practice the theoretical talk of method assemblage, helping to concentrate on the landscape. The researched historical cultures can also point to diverse theories like Nora's concept of lieux de mémoire, as well as, to research methodologies such as oral history or the analysis of visual representation.<sup>12</sup> One common denominator is the social and cultural handling of the process of deindustrialization and its aftermath from the viewpoint of

interviewees and their communities. What becomes apparent in the comparative perspective is the range of discursive framing – from the traumatic memories of the British miners’ strike to the relatively pacified conflict strategies reflected in the memories from the West-German coalfields.<sup>13</sup> In many cases, the collective memory of industry is split between feelings of pride and belonging, on the one hand, and injury that needs to be redressed, on the other. This is particularly apparent for contexts in which industries have literally left behind a toxic legacy with regard to health and the environment, as in the industrial harbour of Venice, Porto Marghera.<sup>14</sup> In many cases, interviewees, actors and communities strive to be recognized and legitimately inscribe themselves into the grand narratives from which they are often excluded. Practitioners of oral history, therefore, become themselves actors in the discursive conflicts of historical representation, be it in the museum, in archival research, local history workshops, or in the context of national heritage debates.<sup>15</sup>

## Next Steps

The study of deindustrialization offers insights into the continuing struggle over the meaning of industrial work and its loss, revealing unresolved social, economic and political tensions. Overall, we reflected on the status of our growing program of events, and the significance of our work within the labor history and broadening scope of our group. There are numerous new aspects to investigate for the future, especially in moving beyond the deindustrial and towards thinking of the post-industrial. In particular, the working group chose the theme of Industrial Heritage Activism: Memory Politics in Public Labour History to showcase at the third biennial EHLN conference in Amsterdam in 2019. At this time participants will explore the critical turn in industrial heritage studies looking at relations, actions and ideologies influencing how industrial heritage has been preserved. This is done by identifying movements, groups and individuals instrumental in the construction, preservation and reinterpretation of the materialities of the industrial heritage in its variety of forms (e.g. factories, landscapes of extraction and infrastructures). Furthermore, new comparative research projects broaden the scope of collaborative partnership including the urban landscapes of Duisburg, Germany; Sesto San Giovanni, Italy and Newcastle, Australia and the project titled “Sociocultural Change, Memory, Heritage and Identities in the context of Industrial Decline” that involves South American and Spanish researchers (introduced in Gijon, Spain in November 2018). These international collaborations not only strengthen the

existing research within Europe, but also broadens our impact beyond European borders, opening up new discourse.

Furthermore, we are developing the more-than-representational themes by collecting selected papers into an edited volume for publication by 2020. Taking into account the developing work explored within this paper the edited monograph explores emerging moments and nodes, where a landscape comes into being of multiple actors and as a more-than-representational approach, which opens up broader perspectives on practices of rhetorical exploitation, discursive representations and performative approaches of dealing with the industrial past, loss and regeneration. Therefore, this provides insights into processes of re-assessing/re-imagining the industrial past, which is essentially future related and the accompanied processes of historical knowledge production and meaning making. The future of deindustrialization will continue to impact not only European concerns, but global issues as well. Our ongoing network will generate useful entry points investigating new perspectives, making critical insights among the diverse critical representations of deindustrialization in different media and contents, and moving these debates into the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Wicke, Christian, and Erik Eklund. "Historical Cultures of Labour Under Conditions of Deindustrialization." *History Workshop Journal* 82, no. 1 (2016): 293–98.

<sup>2</sup> Strangleman, Tim, James Rhodes, and Sherry Linkon. "Introduction to Crumbling Cultures: Deindustrialization, Class, and Memory." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (January 7, 2013): 7–22.

<sup>3</sup> Mah, Alice. *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Urban Decline*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> This review covers a series of meetings, symposia and biennale conference gatherings, including the first and second biennale ELHN conferences held respectively in December 2015 Turin, Italy and November 2017 Paris, France. Further gatherings include oral history and musical/aural engagements in Bochum, Germany and Asturias, Spain. We look forward to the third biennale conference in Amsterdam, Netherlands on September 2019.

<sup>5</sup> High, Steven. "'The Wounds of Class': A Historiographical Reflection on the Study of Deindustrialization, 1973–2013." *History Compass* 11, no. 11 (2013): 994–1007.

<sup>6</sup> Thrift, Nigel. *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Tomann, Juliane. *Geschichtskultur Im Strukturwandel. Öffentliche Geschichte in Katowice Nach 1989*. Oldenbourg: deGruyter, 2017.



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- <sup>8</sup> Azara, Lilirosa, and Eloisa Betti. "Fonti Orali per La Storia Del Lavoro Nel Parco Geominerario Della Sardegna: Orgoglio Identitario e Nostalgia." *Storicamente* 14 (March 28, 2019): 1–18. doi:10.12977/stor737.
- <sup>9</sup> Wylie, John. "Landscape." In *The SAGE Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*, edited by John Agnew and David N. Livingstone, 300–315. London: SAGE Publications, 2011.
- <sup>10</sup> Garcia, Ruben Vega. "Looking Back: Representations of the Industrial Past in Asturias." In *Industrial Heritage and Regional Identities*, edited by Christian Wicke, Stefan Berger, and Jana Golombek, 32–55. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018.
- <sup>11</sup> Law, John. *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2004.
- <sup>12</sup> Nora, Pierre. *Les Lieux de Mémoire*. Munich: Beck, 1992.
- <sup>13</sup> McIvor, Arthur, and Ronnie Johnston. "Narratives from the urban workplace: oral testimonies and the reconstruction of men's work in the heavy industries in Glasgow." In *Testimonies of the City*, pp. 43–53. Routledge, 2016.
- <sup>14</sup> Zazzara, Gilda. "I Cento Anni Di Porto Marghera." *Italia Contemporanea*, no. 284 (2017): 209–36.
- <sup>15</sup> Garcia-Ovies, Alicia. "La Memoria Asturiana, Grabada Para La Historia." *El Comercio*, 2014. <https://www.elcomercio.es/culturas/201407/08/memoria-asturiana-grabada-para-20140708005257-v.html>.